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ABSTRACT

One of a series of reports documenting efforts at educational restructuring nationwide, this paper focuses on the achievements and ideas of James Comer, founder and director of the School Development Program (SDP) of the Child Study Center at Yale University. The first part of the report presents remarks made by Dr. Comer on the history and philosophy of the SDP. The program was structured around a view of child development which takes into account that children are born helpless and grow via five critical developmental pathways: the socio-interactive, or how a child interacts with others; the psycho-emotional, concerning such factors as personal control; the moral; the linguistic; and the intellectual and cognitive. The motivation to learn grows out of the interrelationships among these areas, and children from marginal backgrounds may not perform or behave well in school due to different patterns of development. It was evident that schools try to control this different behavior, resulting in negative attachment and the eventual inability to influence the child positively. In an effort to change the school climate, the SDP formed a governance and management group consisting of nine components as follows: three mechanisms (a governance and management team, a mental health team, and a parents' program); three operations (a comprehensive school plan, staff development activities, and ongoing assessment and modification); and three guidelines (a policy of not laying blame, decision-making by consensus, and full participation without paralyzing the leader). The second part of the report presents an interview with Dr. Comer which covers such topics as elements of teacher preparation, organizing schools open to inquiry and the community, and other aspects of developing more effective schools. (AC)

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Preface

James Comer is the founder and director of the School Development Program, a part of the Yale Child Study Center in the child psychiatry department of the Yale School of Medicine. This program is widely considered one of the most successful models for engaging parents in the life of schools, for helping schools focus more effectively on children's development and learning, and for transforming schools into organizations supportive of student success. Founded by Dr. Comer in 1968, the program began in public schools in New Haven, Connecticut, and has since expanded to schools throughout the United States.

Linda Darling-Hammond, co-director of the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University, and Alexandra King, then a research assistant at NCREST, talked with Dr. Comer on April 22, 1991, in New Haven. They questioned Dr. Comer about the School Development Program and about his career and approach to school reform. Following, first, are the remarks with which Dr. Comer began the conversation and, second, the interview.

We are very grateful to Dr. Comer for his willingness to share his wisdom and experience so freely and for his time helping us prepare this paper for publication.

Linda Darling-Hammond
Ann Lieberman
NCREST

Remarks

I started my professional career in the field of psychiatry at the National Institute of Mental Health in Washington, D.C. Back in those days, I was reading proposals for improving schools and improving the mental health of minority children. Some of those proposals seemed designed to give the professors on the university faculties a salary, and I knew they would not make a difference for the children at all. So I had to get out of there. I wanted to get my hands wet, to try to understand the problems, and to think about how you really make a difference for children.

I came up with a plan. I decided I was going to go someplace to be involved in a hands-on activity, learn about schools, and try to make a difference for young people -- and do it so well that it would get attention in a variety of places and eventually begin to influence national policy.

Recently, the former Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander spoke on national television, and he mentioned two programs that he thought would make a difference for children. One was our program, the other was Ted Sizer's. So, in a way, my dream and hope have come true.

* * *

Our program, the School Development Program, is a part of the Yale Child Study Center, which is a part of the child psychiatry department of the Yale School of Medicine. The Child Study Center looks at a number of issues affecting children of various age groups; ours is the school-age program.

New Haven has been a good place to carry out our project because it is a fairly progressive town. It has always been looking for new ways to address the difficult problems that exist not only here, but throughout the country. Of course, we had to learn to work with the ordinary kinds of resistance, but a number of people here have been supportive of our work from the very beginning. New Haven is just big enough to have all the problems that victimize larger communities, and it is small enough that you can put your hands around those problems and really make a difference. It is a very poor city -- the eighth poorest city of those over 100,000 in the country. And yet, we believed that if we could make a difference here, we could probably make a difference in a lot of other places.

In describing our program, I am going to start with child development. I have always believed that you have to start with an understanding of children. Whatever models or

programs you develop should grow out of that understanding. That is what we did: As we worked in schools, we began to structure our program around our understanding of how children grow, function, and develop.

Later I will talk about the changes that have created the institutional crisis in this country and how that has affected all people -- the Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans in particular. I will talk about the sources of some of my insights and how we applied them to our program. And I will also talk about how you can draw on your own backgrounds to make your programs work wherever you are.

But I will start with the ideas we developed about not only how children grow, but also how the environment around them affects that growth and development.

* * *

A child is born totally dependent, with no particular skills, only its biological makeup. And yet, by 18 years of age, that child is expected to be independent and able to take advantage of advanced training or education or to go to work. And that work should enable that person to take care of himself or herself and a family; to live in a family successfully; to rear children if he or she chooses to do so; to find satisfaction and meaning in life. Because they find satisfaction and meaning in life doing all of these things, they are usually motivated to be responsible citizens of their neighborhoods and communities and the larger society.

Children are not born capable of doing any of the above, so they must be cared for by their parents. If they are not cared for, they will die.

Usually the child is born into a family with another sibling or two. That family is part of a social network of friends, of kin, and of institutions and social organizations that they select and that they feel wanted and valued in -- such as churches, clubs, and the like. These institutions, friends, and kin are carriers of certain attitudes, values, and ways. There is a culture within these institutions and networks with attitudes, values, and ways about everything: about work, about play, about relationships with other people, about learning. And the parents are carriers of those attitudes, values, and ways. As they care for their children, they transmit that culture.

Children are born with aggressive energy and with the capacity to have relationships. That aggressive energy can be destructive to the child and to the people around him or her unless it is channeled into work, play, and learning. The capacity for relationships makes it possible for the child to relate to the caretaker. As the caretaker provides food, warmth, and care, the child makes a bond with that person. The caretaker is then in a position to channel the child's aggressive energy and help him or her learn to control it so that it can be used productively.

Also, as the caretaker interacts with the child, he or she is able to help the child grow along the critical developmental pathways. Five pathways are critically important for academic learning. The first is the socio-interactive pathway -- how you interact with other people. The second is the psycho-emotional -- personal control and the like. The third is the moral. The fourth is the linguistic. The fifth is the intellectual and cognitive pathway. Traditional schooling really only takes the last two pathways into account; the assumption is that children learn in school because of linguistic capacities and their intellectual, cognitive capacities and that is it. Either you have it or you do not, and some people have more than others. The socio-interactive, psycho-emotional, and moral areas are almost completely left out of our thinking about schools and learning. That gets a lot of schools and a lot of children in trouble, because it is development along *all* of these pathways that makes academic learning possible.

The motivation to learn grows out of the interrelationships among all these areas. I will give you an example that also shows how development takes place in incidental and accidental ways as parents live with and interact with their children. The two-year-old who wants to play with another child's ball does not know that he or she cannot just go over and take the ball. A child might try to do that and if the other child resists, pop that child in the mouth and take the ball anyway. The caretaker has to say, "Michael, you can't do that. You'll have to do something else until Johnny is through, or maybe you can play together, work it out, or just go away."

In the process of mediating that little incident, the caretaker helps the child grow along all the critical developmental pathways. He or she is helping the child learn to interact appropriately with other people, to control the impulse to hit -- that is, to begin a process of psychological development. The child may be frustrated or angry as a result of being limited, and the caretaker helps the child learn to manage those feelings. In that incident, the child also learns what is right, what is wrong, and that is the beginning of moral development. Language is involved in this exchange, and the child is thinking, too. So development along all the critical pathways takes place in that single incident. Multiply that by the many, many such interactions that parents have with their children prior to school, and that is how development takes place.

Parents stimulate their children's thinking under all kinds of circumstances. For example: I was in a store recently and saw a child step on the automatic door opener. The door flew open and the two- or three-year-old child's eyes lit up. He was surprised. He stepped off, and, of course, the door closed. The youngster stepped on again and off again, over and over. Eventually his mother got involved -- watched, asked questions about what he thought, and finally explained that the platform was somehow connected to something that opened the door. This shows how a parent or caretaker helps a child travel through one of many learning experiences. And it is typical of the kinds of mediated learning experiences of the middle-class, mainstream child.

Of course, many youngsters do not get this kind of help. One day at the airport I saw

a youngster about seven or eight years old waiting for his mother near the airport security gate. All of a sudden he yelled out, "Hey mom, what if I was carrying a bomb!" His mother quickly responded, "I'll smack you in the mouth!" The youngster kind of shriveled up, turned his back on everyone in the area who had heard the interchange, and sulked in the corner. This incident shows how parents can miss an opportunity to mediate a learning experience by examining and explaining the problem and appropriate behavior.

Parents often play the first critical role in terms of their children's reading ability. Many parents, even at the end of a long day, will have their children snuggle up to them on the couch or on the bed and read to them. This is a very warm, very comforting experience for children. And, of course, those of you who have done this know that youngsters will demand that you read the same story to them over and over again, until they begin to recite the twists and turns of the story themselves. During this repetitive reading of bedtime stories, the child learns that the parent reads from left to right, that at a certain point the parent turns the page, and that somehow the pictures correspond to the words being read. Through this process, children also see that one way to win the approval of adults is to ask them to read a story and to recite the story along with them.

This is the child who, entering school at age five or six (if he or she has not gone to preschool), already knows how to read. Of course, this child meets the best of the teacher's expectations. The teacher conveys approval to the child, so a positive interaction occurs between them, making bonding possible. The youngster then is able to identify and internalize the values and attitudes of teachers and schoolpeople, making the school program more meaningful. When children internalize learning as a value, they are motivated to learn on their own.

What happens to children who are not from traditional mainstream families, but rather from marginal or what we tend to call "antisocial" backgrounds? These are the children who are not able to sit still and be spontaneous or curious learners. They are the children who do not meet our best expectations. They are the ones we label bad, who fight in school, who cannot relate in any positive ways to the school program. They are viewed as "dumb," hopeless.

These children are actually underdeveloped or differently developed. They have attitudes, values, and ways of surviving that are appropriate for a totally different kind of environment -- in other kinds of places like the streets, the projects, or pool halls -- but not for school. These youngsters display inappropriate and difficult behavior. The typical response of the schools is to try to control their behavior. What usually follows is a struggle, and the child develops a negative attachment to the school and the staff. The school winds up losing its ability to influence the child positively.

Parents have sent these children off to school with ambivalent feelings in the first place. Their hope was that the school would make a difference and that their children would be better off by attending. But their fear was that their children would be rejected -- that

they would not be successful in school. As the struggle begins to take place because the children cannot meet the expectations of the school and schoolpeople cannot help them make it within the system, the worst fears of the parents are confirmed. Alienation begins to develop -- if it was not there from the beginning. Anger and frustration with the school and distrust of schoolpeople develop. So there is a block between home and school that makes it very difficult for children to live by the ways and expectations of the school -- even when they know and understand them.

Despite all of this, some of these children do reasonably well up to the age of eight or nine. After third grade, however, the academic demands of the school curriculum begin to outstrip the academic preparation of the student. At the same time, the child is developing the cognitive capacity to understand that these people over here (the people in schools) are different from me and my parents, friends, kin, the people I know and am related to. Sometime between third and seventh grade, children place themselves. They look at the people around them, how they live and where they work; and they look at what their aunts, uncles, and parents do. Through this process, they begin to understand who they are and what their futures can be.

The sources of affirmation for the child are parents and friends. If these two groups (family and schoolpeople) are not relating to each other and supporting each other, then we are asking the child to make a choice. When we ask children to learn in school -- children from difficult, troubled backgrounds, from families under stress -- we are really asking them to be different from their own parents. Children do not normally do that easily, unless there is some support for it, so we have created a problem for them.

When my son was eight years old, we were riding down the street one day, and a fire engine went by. He said, "Oh, I want to be a fireman when I grow up." He was very excited about it. But when he was in seventh grade, he brought home brochures about future courses and opportunities with pictures on the front of such occupations as doctors, nurses, teachers, and firemen. As I went over it with him, I tried a little experiment. I said, "OK, fireman, let's see what kind of courses you need to become a fireman." He looked at me with a blank expression on his face and asked, "What is this fireman stuff you're talking about?" His "placement" process had eliminated that option. That is what happens to all children.

In addition, as children get older, the teacher and often parents have less influence. By the time they are eight or nine years of age, children become more independent and the influence of the peer group is greater. For low-income families under stress, peer groups are more negative and their pull is greater.

For children from all backgrounds, there is a learning curve. For children from mainstream families, it goes steadily up. Low-income children are not far behind in the beginning, and their learning curves also go up. But after about third grade, for the reasons mentioned, they begin to level off. Around seventh grade several significant things take

place at about the same time. Significant body changes occur. Children often change schools. Peer groups become more of a pull, and young people having the most difficulty managing all the changes are most often pulled into negative peer group cultures. Finally, the learning curve takes a sharp downward plunge. Our task is to help them manage and develop so that the learning curve can continue to head up.

What we found in many schools is a culture of failure rather than an environment that could promote desirable development. This occurs because of the difficult interactions that I described earlier. Schools are mainstream institutions, and the expectations of the school are mainstream demands. But these children grow up in families under economic and social stress and outside the mainstream. Children who are underdeveloped or differently developed have a difficult time in school, and staff respond in ways that are troublesome because they are not prepared. There is a struggle. Often the parents are brought into it. They become angry, frustrated, disappointed, or they simply withdraw, and they are not successful in supporting the program of the school. Even when they want their children to succeed, they do not do things at home that will help their children in school. As a result, the schools are not successful in helping the children learn. That is what we have to change.

Again, learning takes place through imitation and internalization of the school values. Even when low-income children are gifted, they are likely not to be successful in school and not to internalize academic learning as a value. We must change the school environment so that this difficult interaction is changed -- replace it with a good school climate in which imitation, identification, and internalization can take place and learning can become valued.

* * *

How can we do that? We discovered that we could not mandate it; we could not just say, "You should work differently; you should respect children, support their development." We could not just say that and expect people to do it. Second, we could not just talk about child development and expect people to teach differently. Even a gifted teacher cannot do that in a school that is chaotic and difficult and troublesome or in a community that is chaotic with a different set of values. We had to create a climate within the school that allowed this kind of attachment to take place.

When we first started trying to do change schools, we really did not know what we were doing. We were responding to certain kinds of pressures. Parents were very angry. They felt shut out. Teachers felt powerless. So we created a governance and management (G & M) group in the school. We had to create something that would bring everyone -- all the parents, teachers, and administrators -- together. We felt that the divisiveness, the troubled relationships, blocked any chance for success.

The team was initially led by the principal. It could be led by teachers or parents, but with parents you do not get the continuity you need. Every adult stakeholder in the school should be represented on the team. Then everyone has a sense of ownership. Parents

are selected by parents; teachers are selected by teachers, probably by grade level. It is important to have a parent from every community represented in the school. It is equally important to have the nonprofessional staff represented. I want to emphasize that the central office, the superintendent, the middle-management people, and the board all must support this process if it is to be successful.

Our first G & M group (School Planning and Management Team -- SPMT -- as it is called in some places) grew into a nine-component program, with *three mechanisms*, *three operations*, and *three guidelines*. Let me describe those briefly.

The three mechanisms include the *governance and management team*, a *mental health* or *support staff team*, and a *parents' program*.

The G & M team carries out the three operations that drive the school. First, it develops a *comprehensive school plan* with specific goals for improving social climate and academic performance. These goals drive *staff-development activities*. I often see schools with many effective programs, all moving in different directions. The comprehensive school plan serves to pull everything together. There is also *ongoing assessment and modification*. Twice a year, every activity is reviewed in terms of whether it went according to plan, and there is a serious effort to adjust the program.

Our three guidelines are also important and become part of the values that must exist within the school. The first guideline is a *no-fault policy*. In most schools, we are always blaming each other for our lack of success. No-fault says we are not going to waste time placing blame; we are going to try to solve the problem.

The second guideline is that *decisions should be made by consensus*. When we vote, there are winners and losers, and we do not have everyone's support. When we are reaching consensus, we consider what to do on the basis of what is good for children. We agree that we will try it this way; if it does not work, then we will try it another way. Perhaps in the process we will find a third way that is even better, and we will try that. The idea is to find a way that works, rather than to create a win-lose situation.

The third guideline is *no paralysis and full participation*. We agree not to paralyze the leader, whoever that is; and the leader agrees not to ignore input from group members. Even if the principal is not the leader of the group, we agree not to paralyze him or her since he or she has legal responsibility for what goes on in the school.

These guidelines are generated in the governance and management team and begin to permeate all subcommittees and the entire school. They help promote cooperation and collaboration, rather than conflict, struggle, and competition.

* * *

Let us think again about the problem in communities and schools under stress. First of all, there is the alienation between home and school. Educators do not realize how alienated or intimidated many parents are. For example, we had a parent in our program who is very bright and what we call "very fine" [attractive]. At the end of her first feedback session, she told us how delighted she was that this school respects parents, because when she first started participating she thought that she did not have anything to contribute to professionals. It occurred to us that if this lady, who had everything going for her, felt this way, what about parents who are struggling with problems that are much more difficult?

Many parents feel intimidated. As a matter of fact, our assistant superintendent told us that when she first took her child to kindergarten her knees were buckling. She thought that she would be judged and her child-rearing would be judged. That is exactly what many parents feel when they take their children to school. So parents from all economic backgrounds, but particularly parents who have been under economic stress, are intimidated by the school. And many of these parents have had bad experiences in school and remember school as a bad place.

Because parents and staff work together designing it, the social program of the school can help overcome that alienation. Getting it going first is tremendously important. Once the social program gets going, more time and energy are available for the academic program. We can decrease the behavior problems. The sense of animosity between home and school also decreases when people get to know each other through social activities.

I want to make the point that timing is very important. We have found that if we emphasize the wrong thing first, we can get into trouble. We made a mistake in Benton Harbor, Michigan. We started with the parents before the staff, and we did not bring enough people into the process. As a result, an adversarial relationship developed between the parents and the staff, and we spent a lot of time overcoming that.

Many parents have skills in the social area, and some of them do not have good skills in academic areas. So we are approaching them in an area of strength rather than weakness. It is important to make sure the first activity is successful. Otherwise people get discouraged and pull away from the school.

By starting with the social program, you can get positive feedback going on in the school before you can get that same kind of feedback from an academic activity. In one district, they started first on the academic programs in one or two schools. Then they could not figure out what this project was all about because they were not getting the kind of feedback they should have been getting. What should happen first is that we create a good climate, overcome the alienation between home and school, and decrease the behavior problems; all this gives us more time for academic program planning, and that will give us the kind of feedback that is important.

It is very important that in our comprehensive plan we take on things we can manage

within the school. Often people want to change the curriculum downtown, or the traffic patterns in front of the school, or other external changes requiring tremendous amounts of time, energy, and power that they do not have. The people downtown are much more willing to cooperate and support what we are doing when we demonstrate that we have a well-functioning school with successful students where parents are supportive and helpful. So timing and taking on issues we can manage first are very important.

Another problem we have experienced is that most staff have never taken an applied child development course. Now, that is odd, to have people working with children who have never had a course about how children grow and develop, but that is what we have. So we want to help them, without making them feel that they do not know anything about children. One of the best ways to do this is to have the mental health team work with individual children, but look for patterns related to conditions in the school -- the transfer policy or orientation program, for example. Then have a member of the mental health team -- the social worker, psychologist, special education teacher, or counselor -- get the governance and management team to change that policy or program and begin to make sure that everything going on in the school is sensitive to what children are all about.

For example: We had a child who was in a classroom for eight months and did not smile at the teacher. The child had been traumatized and did not trust adults. After eight months with a caring, predictable, responsible teacher, the child finally smiled. But the teacher was really frustrated because she realized that in two more months she would have to pass the child on and would not be able to build on their new relationship. So the team talked about it. We had a meeting and talked about the principle of continuity. How do children grow? They grow because they have a primary figure with whom they interact over time -- a trusted, caring, responsible person who mediates their experiences. And that creates continuity in their lives -- which is very important because it allows them to gain enough confidence to take the chances necessary for learning. So what happened? The teachers came up with the idea of keeping children with the same teacher for two years. Some children who made no academic gain in the first year caught up or made two years of growth in the second.

Many other ideas -- the discovery room and the crisis room, for example -- grew out of working with an individual child, figuring out that the problem was in the larger system, and modifying the system so that it better met the needs of the children. In this way, knowledge about children moves from the mental health team into the general education pool. And then teachers themselves begin to respond to children differently. When we set up the crisis room, for example, it was very effective. Then we noticed that after three years, nobody was using it. Why? Because the teachers themselves had developed ways of working with children based on what was being done in the crisis room; they no longer had to send children there. And that is the idea: to get knowledge into the hands of teachers.

All of these activities create a very good climate in the school. Even if people do not like each other, they get along reasonably well. There is good feeling between home and

school; the schoolpeople feel supported, the parents feel supported, and the children feel supported. As a result of that, children can imitate, identify with, and internalize the attitudes, values, and ways of schoolpeople -- they can relate to the program in the school, and they will learn.

We started out with the notion that our expertise was in the behavioral and social science area and not in learning, instruction, and curriculum. We stayed out of that. But we are beginning to move into those areas more now because we are finding in some of the schools that the climate improvements translate into social gains but not as much into academic gains without staff development that makes the translation possible. I want to emphasize the importance of paying attention to the academic program from the very beginning in order to make the most of the improved climate.

* * *

I want to finish by making some points about historical issues in this country that have affected the progress of Blacks and other minorities.

Many people want to know why there are disproportionate numbers of poor Black and Latino people. Why have they not been able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and succeed here in America like other immigrant groups? Let us take a look at some of the major economic trends and changes in our history.

About 1945, something remarkable happened in the history of the world, and it created many problems: in the economy, in the community, in the nature of family, child-rearing, and education. Prior to 1945, we were a nation of small towns and rural areas. Even the cities were collections of small towns. There was no television, communication was limited, and transportation -- getting from one place to another -- was difficult. Under those circumstances, adults and children interacted at the post office, the church, a variety of familiar places.

I used to walk to school hand-in-hand with my third-grade teacher. There were five people between my house and school who would report it if I went one step out of the way. It was difficult to get into trouble. Yet, like other children, I was curious about my environment and I could get into trouble. Once when I was about to, under the eye of the lady next door (who was also a member of my church), and before I even got home, my father knew what I was up to. Fortunately I had a father who did not spank me, but pointed out that if I wanted to be respected by the people in my neighborhood and church, there were certain things I could do and certain things I could not. Because it was important to me to be respected, I just did not do those things -- at least not where anybody could see me.

The point I am making is that all of those adults were locked in a conspiracy to make certain that children grew up to become responsible people. And the nature of community was such that there were sanctions everywhere. If we asked one adult what was right or

wrong, good or bad, he or she said the same thing as every other adult. So we were limited in how much we could act up and act out.

That was also a time when it did not matter so much if you did not succeed in school. You could work on a farm, in a factory, in a variety of places that did not require a diploma, and still meet all of your adult responsibilities. Without an education you could become a head of a household, take care of your children, be a respected member of a community, find satisfaction and meaning in life, and be motivated to become a responsible citizen.

Around 1945 television began to change all that. It brought information from around the world directly to children. Sometimes the attitudes, values, and ways transmitted were different from the ones that parents were trying to teach their children; as a result, attitudes, values, and ways no longer came only from the important adults in the lives of children. For example, we used to censor; there were certain things we did not talk about to children -- things they did not know about until they reached a certain age. And we could censure children if they behaved inappropriately; almost any adult could censure a child, and they did.

Now people live farther from each other. Rarely today can a third grader walk hand-in-hand with a teacher, because teachers drive long distances to school. Children receive all kinds of information from all kinds of places. The parents and teachers -- formerly the most important adults in the lives of children -- are no longer the holders of all truth, and they no longer speak with a common tongue about what is good and bad. There are many truths out there. Children must find their own way through them. They must go out into the world figuring things out on their own -- with more information than ever before, with all kinds of contradictory information, and without the same kinds of supportive relationships with adults.

In addition, we have had three very powerful movements: the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the Vietnam War movement. All three challenged traditional authority figures. All three have had important liberating influences, but they also changed the way we look at authority. No longer do we automatically think authority figures are right or do they receive our respect; now they must earn it. This affects schools. It used to be that authority was automatically transferred from the home to the school. That is no longer true. The school has to earn the respect of parents and children in order for its values, attitudes, and ways to be accepted. That is a dramatic change.

At the same time, because of high mobility, better education, and lots of other things, families and communities have changed. There are more families with both parents working, more divorce, more single-parent families, and more activity -- people are busy all the time. So children have less support for their development at a time when a higher level of education is needed just to get a job.

That means we have to adjust all of our institutions to help families and children. We need public policies, housing policies, health policies, to make it easier on families. Most

industrialized countries in the world did that back in the 1930s and 1940s; they developed housing programs, health programs, and lots of other programs to make it possible for most of their families to function well. We did not. As a result, we have increasing numbers of families under economic and social stress, and a disproportionate number of them are Black, Latino, and Native American. But a majority of the poor people in this country are White, and we must not forget those children either.

I would like to talk a little bit about the interaction of our economic system and the social makeup of our communities. I want to do this in a way that will help us think about how to develop more effective programs, not point the finger of blame, make excuses, or make anybody feel guilty.

Think about the European immigrants who came to this country prior to 1900. They had a degree of social cohesion because they had the language of the old country, the religion from the old country; they often lived together in the new country. Many had some ties to money in the old country. Within one generation they were able to get the vote, start businesses, and begin to move into the mainstream. They were able to provide for themselves and their families. There was a sense of stability because people had satisfaction and meaning in life -- they could meet their life tasks and responsibilities. They reared their children to be able to meet the demands of the economy at a time when you needed only a moderate amount of education and skills to be successful.

That changed after 1945. From 1945 to 1980, success in meeting your needs and those of your family required increasing levels of skill and education. Only this allowed you to give your children the kinds of experiences that would enable them to be successful in the economic mainstream. After the 1980s, of course, education has become even more important. In short, the lives of the immigrants -- despite the fact that they endured a number of hardships -- were marked with a degree of cohesion that allowed them to undergo three generations of change and development paralleling the economic changes in society.

Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans had different experiences. I will talk about Blacks only, in ways that will help us develop programs to compensate for some of the problems.

The Black experience was marked by a loss of culture. Culture gives people a sense of direction, a sense of worth and value. For Blacks, that was cut off -- at least the economic and political part of it. A slave culture was imposed. This is a system of forced dependency, of inferiority. You are inherently inferior no matter how smart or how able you are or how hard you work; you are defined as inferior. And there is no sense of tomorrow. You are not preparing yourself or your family for a better place in society tomorrow. So for many people there was no value in delaying gratification and planning for tomorrow. And that had negative psycho-social effects, which were transmitted from generation to generation, right up until the present time among some.

Many African-Americans were protected by the church culture or by the rural small town culture until the 1950s. As late as 1950, only 22 percent of all African-American families were single-parent families. Families were working reasonably well because these traditional cultures protected them. Despite this, Blacks were powerless in the system. After slavery, they were denied the vote; they had no political power. Without political power, they were denied economic power, and without economic power they continued to be denied political power.

Then education became the ticket to a living-wage job. In the eight states with 80 percent of the Black population, however, four to eight times as much money was spent on the education of a White child as was spent on the education of a Black child. That was true right up through the 1940s. It might still be true, but it is difficult to determine. In places that were disproportionately Black, the disparity was often as high as twenty-five times. As late as 1964-1965, the combined endowment of two of the country's most prestigious women's colleges was equal to one half of Harvard's -- and that was more than the total combined endowments of all the 100-plus Black colleges in the country.

In other words, Blacks have been massively undereducated from the end of slavery right up to the present moment. Between 1900 and 1945, when our educational system was being established and the rest of America was being educated in a way and at a level that would prepare them for this critical period between 1945 and 1980 and beyond, Blacks were massively undereducated. To make matters worse, they were also pushed off the farms by automation and into the cities.

As a result, many families that once functioned well in small towns lost their traditional supports. And they functioned less well in each successive generation. In addition, families that functioned well in urban areas reduced themselves in size. Families of eight dwindled down to families of two. So the families with the greatest growth in population are disproportionately poor and poorly functioning. I am not saying that any group of people should not have children. What I am saying is that we have to adjust the institutions that provide support for these families. We have to aid in the development of their children so that they can get the education necessary to function in the economic mainstream. Again, we Americans did not do it, and so a disproportionate number of Black children and families are living at the margins of our society.

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That is the challenge faced by our schools. It is not only a Black issue because all of our children are having more trouble than ever before. The suicide rate has gone up; violence and vandalism are rising; and those problems are found in children of middle-income families as much as or more than in those from low-income families.

The theme is that the school -- the primary institution in the lives of American children -- has to change in fundamental ways. And it has to change in ways that encourage

children's development along all the critical pathways. The school can no longer say that a few children are smart and able, and we will help them succeed, and that is all that the United States needs to worry about. The country needs 95 percent -- at least 90 percent -- of her children to succeed in school, to finish school, so that they can join the work force and be responsible citizens.

That is our challenge and we believe that our model addresses the needs. It allows the school to be less hierarchical and authoritarian so that children and adults can feel an emotional attachment instead of feeling rejected and left out. Our model creates an institution in which everyone feels supported and in which children can develop and make the academic and social gains that will allow them to hold decent jobs and become responsible citizens.

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Interview

AK: What are some of your reflections on the current status of the restructuring movement?[1]

JC: What do educators mean by "restructuring"? I never really liked that term. It sounds too much like moving a wall from here to there; it sounds architectural and mechanical. It seems to me that, again, it leaves the kids out. How do kids grow and develop and learn? That's the question we ought to start with. The way that we organize and manage schools ought to be based on what we know about kids. And the way we select and train staff ought to be based on what we know about kids. And all the other things we do in education ought to be based on that.

LDH: Let me ask you to talk a little bit more about how you would transform the preparation of teachers so that they are better able to teach children, considering how they learn and how they grow. What do we need to do in teacher education?

JC: First, future teachers should be selected for their ability to relate. After meeting a certain intelligence and academic achievement requirement, their ability to relate to children and parents needs to be considered.

It's interesting that the best performing arts schools select students, expose them to the arts, and then observe and counsel them out if they can't make it. Both of my kids are in the arts. At the end of their sophomore year they were counseled -- either in or out. We should do that in teacher preparation, before people have invested so much in it that they have to stay whether they're good at it or not.

Education has always had a fair number of poor and first-generation middle-class people. They can't afford to spend four years in school and then discover that they're not cut out for this; often, they have nowhere else to go. So some kind of screening process is important very early on. They ought to be exposed to children. They ought to take a practicum that asks them to do as much in supporting child development as it does in instruction and curriculum. And there ought to be master teachers capable of supervising them -- helping them gain the skills or helping them understand that teaching is not for them.

LDH: What else would you want future teachers to be exposed to during that preparation period? Are there obvious gaps and omissions in what goes on now?

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[1]AK is Alexandra King, JC is James Comer, and LDH is Linda Darling-Hammond.

JC: I think teachers don't know enough about families and communities and how they function. Interaction is the bottom line. All the behavioral social sciences are isolated. The only ones that look at interaction are anthropology and human ecology -- and human ecology can't even get a foothold because of the territorial nature of academic departments. Interaction is critically important, and how the various economic, social, and other systems come to bear on and affect the interactions of people. We still don't pay enough attention to that.

LDH: You do a lot of that in your work with schoolpeople -- you really are bringing a new set of understandings into the school.

JC: One of the things I have always worried about, particularly when it comes to the education of minority kids, is that you have people at the highest levels of policy in this country who don't know the first thing about the African-American experience or the Latino experience. Many of the mistakes with schools, with desegregation and efforts to integrate, have been made because of this. The need to deny is also part of the problem. But if policy makers knew more, we could have policies that make more sense.

LDH: How do you create school organizations with more capacity to access and use knowledge? School organizations aren't constructed to be permeable.

JC: What I mean when I talk about restructuring is changing from the hierarchical, authoritarian, information-passing-on posture to one that's more participatory, where true learning -- inquiry and investigation -- is considered desirable. You don't start out with the notion that you know everything. You explore and investigate. If that's what you want to model through the way you organize your school, then you have to see the teachers and administrators as still in the learning process themselves.

LDH: Tell us in what ways we can help schools become more oriented to inquiry.

JC: I hope that our model is designed to do that. We have a governance and management team. It develops a comprehensive school plan that only says, "Here's what we'd like to have children know and do down the line somewhere. How do we go about doing that?" Then we develop a curriculum exploring the environment of the children and various aspects of what they will need to know. We do it through field trips, bringing people in, exposing people to new things. We reflect on those things together. We write about them and think about them together. We create an environment of exploration and investigation. We take established information, test it, and find out if it makes sense in light of what we have observed, instead of just saying, "This is the way it is.".

AK: How do you transform a school organization so that schoolpeople can accept the notion that they can learn from the school community?

JC: Put parents, teachers, and administrators together to plan and they automatically begin

to learn from each other. When I was on the MacArthur team that was visiting one of our schools, we went to a meeting of a school planning and management team. One of the teachers on the team had the idea to collect clothing for the needy and gave his suggestions about how they ought to go about doing this. One of the parents on the team very nicely helped them think about how parents receiving the clothing might feel and suggested that this be the basis for weighing various distribution alternatives. I'm sure the teacher learned from this without feeling put down. That activity would have failed had the parent not made that input.

Now here was a case where teachers learned from parents. And that was possible only because they had gone through a process that had created a climate of trust and mutual respect. That becomes possible when you create mechanisms allowing the key people in the school organization -- teachers, administrators, specialists, semi-professionals, and parents -- to interact.

LDH: One of the things that lots of people in schools have discovered in their attempts to make schools more learning-centered is that before anything else, the adults need to learn to relate in entirely new ways. Are there any particular lessons you've learned about this?

JC: Our whole program is about relationships. I argue that the problem is that we see learning as a mechanical process; we forget that we're all human beings and that we're trying to maintain our self-esteem and sense of adequacy. As a result, we're defensive and we react to certain things in ways that can block communication. We have to address all the relationship issues at every level and in every way before the school can be a learning place.

We start out by systematically trying to create an environment of good working relationships and a value system that says "We're going to try to be open, responsible, mutually respectful, and so on." And we can't just say it; we have to create it.

AK: How do you do that?

JC: Go back to the model. We have to create some mechanisms that allow the key groups and people in the program to interact with each other. The parent group, the professional support staff, and the nonprofessional staff -- all those people are tied together through the governance and management team. As they develop their comprehensive school plan, everybody has a role in making that plan work. And part of the plan is the social program of the school. We create a series of activities that are a deliberate, open attempt to improve relationships in the school. We start out by saying that.

AK: Social activities like --

JC: A welcome-back-to-school potluck supper in September, a Halloween walk in October, all the things that schools do haphazardly as frills. But now we do them as a systematic effort to make the school a good place. The staff and parents are now relating to each other

well because they've worked together and have learned to respect each other. And they work together further in designing these activities to support the social development of the children. They [the adults] prepare for these activities, they learn how to act during these activities. They agree on what they want the children to learn -- how to act during these activities, how to manage their feelings. The adults become committed to those things, and then they teach them to the children.

AK: Can this work in a school where there isn't a whole lot of knowledge about child development and behavior -- where people think that the best thing for kids is to keep them in line through severe discipline measures?

JC: That's why the model rests heavily on the mental health team. Somebody on the mental health staff or team has to help the governance and management team think about child development. They have to be integrally involved at every step, not sitting on the sidelines in an office somewhere. When I go to some schools to talk to people, I can often tell the regular classroom teachers from the support-staff teachers. They sit on opposite sides of the table. They don't talk to each other. Often they don't even know each other or don't like each other. They're jealous of each other's different working conditions -- because they haven't been working together in any well-structured, integrated kind of way.

The support staff in most schools generally take the kids away to "fix" them, rather than work with teachers to create situations in the classrooms to address the needs of the children. In most schools, the support-staff people work individually; psychologists, social workers, counselors, special education teachers -- they're all doing their thing separately. They never talk to each other. As a result, there's duplication of effort and other problems: kids yanked in and out of classrooms, fragmentation.

We put support staff together as a team so that they're not just looking at individual children, they're also looking at the impact of the system on those children. They begin to see patterns of problems that are caused by conditions in the school. Through a representative on the governance and management team, they begin to change policies and practices within the school and make the school more child-centered. These people become valuable to the general classroom teachers and administrators because of their knowledge of child development.

LDH: Can you think of ways to help schoolpeople begin to think more structurally about the problems? There is a tendency to look at problems as idiosyncratic: The problem is with that kid over here or that teacher over there.

JC: This is the method. You start out looking at the individual. But when you have two, three, or more individuals in that category --

LDH: But do the teams do that naturally?

JC: The coordinator often has to help them think structurally. For example, in Prince Georges County and in other places, they started something called "Round Robin." They talk about global issues, things they've noticed that are troublesome. The idea is to get beyond the individual child and look at larger issues that might be problems but might also be opportunities. What happens is that on the governance and management team, they live by the guidelines I described earlier: "no-fault," decisions by consensus, and no paralysis and full participation. When a team generates that, and team members remind each other and hold each other to that, that becomes the value system of the school. It permeates everything: all the subcommittee meetings, all the other meetings that go on. And the school becomes the kind of place where people are expected to participate and not to point the finger of blame.

AK: What if a school doesn't have a mental health worker -- what if that person was cut in the last round of budget cuts?

JC: We say use whoever or whatever you have that comes close -- a counselor, a nurse, anybody. Whoever you have who worries about and is knowledgeable about kids, how they grow and learn.

LDH: On a resource level, what kind of policies in the future are needed to ensure that schools have mental health and child development expertise?

JC: All support staff ought to be trained in such a way that they don't merely think about the individual alone but also think about the systemic issues, the way a system functions that creates or prevents a problem. Psychiatrists have created the high-prestige way of working: sitting and talking with the individual kid. There's no question that that's an inefficient way of working. Most kids are not sick; most of them are trying to function, often without adequate socialization in a complex and demanding system. What should be focused on is socialization, not treatment. We have to create a climate in which children can relate to somebody, who is then able to influence their behavior positively, helping them understand more mature ways of behaving, ways that are likely to meet their needs.

LDH: Does building those relationships lead to different ways of organizing groups of adults and children?

JC: Yes, it often does. Some examples are teaming and cooperative learning. At the high school, they structured a special program, an hour-long session of teachers and small groups of kids -- just a discussion about life, about themselves. It grew out of a need to get teachers and students together in some nonacademic way that dealt with both school-related and life issues.

LDH: That sounds a little bit like the advisement system that Central Park East Elementary School in New York City uses.

JC: I've talked about the fact that every kid in the school ought to have an adult they can go to when they have a problem, someone they can count on.

LDH: How do you get people who aren't on the governance and management team to buy into the process? One of the things we often find is that when these special teams begin to gain some success and begin to attract some notice, they also become targets of ill feelings and jealousy, and the team may sometimes create even more divisiveness.

JC: Yes, that's especially true in high schools. The team has to create a little beachhead of good feelings by addressing some very important issues, and eventually everyone else wants to jump on board. Team members have to be constantly on the lookout for new people to involve. And they have to find ways to systematically let people in at carefully timed points.

Someone is always coming up with an idea that people like. And then usually what happens is that everyone wants to get involved. People take bits and pieces of their experience to make the idea better. Eventually that process -- of letting people enter the team at carefully determined points -- becomes the norm for the school.

Another example that comes to mind occurred in Prince Georges County. Teachers were concerned about the standardized test scores of the children in one particular subject area. One of the team members had this idea: "Rather than teach to the test, why not test the kids first, then teach what they don't know?" The kids knew what they were about to take six weeks to teach. By not going over things the kids already knew, they had more time to cover areas where the kids were having difficulty.

LDH: If I were going to place a label on your model, I think I'd call it the "clinical practice of education" -- it applies your knowledge about kids to inquiring about and solving school problems. If you had a genie in a bottle, what kinds of policies would you implement that would allow these practices to become the norm in schools?

JC: First, I'd select teachers through a careful screening process. Then I'd expose them to the clinical setting where they could get information about the impact of our society on children's development; that's during their preservice training. All the professional staff in schools need a common core of knowledge about how children grow and how to work with each other to promote it. Then when social workers and psychologists come into the schools, they would be prepared to work with and learn from teachers, and teachers would be prepared to learn from the mental health workers, so that each could use the other more effectively.

Another major area, of course is curriculum. Teachers need more practical knowledge about how to make curriculum and content more interesting and exciting. In one of our schools, general classroom teachers and mental health experts collaborated on a curriculum unit that had to do with health. The result was very exciting -- the kids were engaged as well as the adults.

So first I'd create a preservice program that gets child development knowledge to prospective teachers early. The goal is to help student teachers think about kids' growth, development, and behavior -- as well as the curriculum issues. But I believe that child development knowledge is the most important piece. That membrane between teacher and student has to be permeable.

The environment -- the climate within the schools -- usually determines whether the kid is going to learn. Some teachers can be effective in the worst settings, but most of them can't. A cooperative central office staff is needed to facilitate the development of that kind of climate, by doing things like setting out broader guidelines that won't hinder the school from what it's trying to do. The real leadership of the school should come from within the school. So often the messages from downtown deflect the attention of the staff from the real issues in the school.

We found that when we approached the central office about the kinds of staff-development activities that would meet the needs of students, the administrators were receptive, because they saw the school staff -- and the parents -- taking an interest. We were able to change that top-down kind of communication by goal-directed bottom-up activities. We have found that when we're in conflict with the central office, it's almost useless to talk to them about this. They will respond, however, when we take a problem-solving approach. Under our model, the building-level group learns how to confront those powerful outer structures more effectively from a framework that is built on the needs of the children in the building.

In addition, the central office needs to develop ways to support the selection of candidates who are carefully screened by schools of education and provide early monitoring of new teachers. We lose a lot of young teachers with potential because of what happens in the first two weeks of school, mainly because they don't receive the kind of support that would make them feel welcome and comfortable in their new roles. One year at the King School, three new teachers came on board at once. They set up a process so that each of those teachers got a mentor to give them feedback and help them through all the situations they encountered.

I would also put in place an extended day and an extended year -- the kids may not need it but the staff certainly does for planning, feedback, and analysis. We need mechanisms to give kids and staff the continuity they need.

AK: Does this mean that your plan would require more funding for schools?

JC: I don't think funding is the major issue. The real problem is that we can't continue to hire and fire teachers according to the ups and downs of the economy. Schools need a stable staff. The King School, which was our first school, hasn't lost staff in 15 years. When a school has a high staff turnover rate, we know that there are serious problems in that school and in the district as a whole.

AK: Is your model the key to making all of this work?

JC: We started by using the case-conference method, where the mental health team discussed certain problems that occurred with a particular kid. In the process, teachers learned a lot about child development and ways to go about finding appropriate responses to individual problems. Eventually more and more teachers dropped by to share information about their students -- so a support system developed. The group evolved from one in which teachers were receiving information from the mental health team to one in which they began piecing together bits of information to devise structures to deal with buildingwide issues affecting larger numbers of students.

In participatory settings, information is shared, and making suggestions to improve things becomes the norm of the school. When everybody supports this, the kids get the message, too, from a variety of sources -- including their community -- and they begin to accept it. That's a much more powerful message than when everyone's in his own corridor with limited authority.